

Psalm 29

Well friends, today we start our sermon series on the Psalms – looking at these songs of faith, exploring them, understanding them and most especially listening to what God has to say to us through them to encourage our faith – in Jesus Christ.

And as we start I want to point out to you that reading the Psalms can be a lot like looking at someone’s Facebook page – in the sense that you see all the status updates and pictures of the really exciting or dramatic or terribly sad events which have occurred in their life.

You also get a sense of what is important to them, what their ideas and opinions are about social issues and political topics when you see which posts and memes they’ve liked.

And after browsing someone’s Facebook page you might come away with the impression they have this exceptionally rich, vibrant, exciting life full of fun activities and friends and they always look amazing in the midst of it all.

Reading through the Psalms can have the same effect – you might come away with the impression that the Psalmist has this amazing devotional life in the midst of all sorts of dramatic ups and downs and encounters with God – and that God is always acting mightily for them and for the people of Israel and that somehow God was more “real” back then...

But while we might think that the Israelites experienced and witnessed more of God’s mighty deeds and miracles back in the day, the truth is that in the day to day life of the average Israelite they witnessed no more or no less of God’s amazing deeds and power than we do.

The day to day life of the average Israelite from when they entered the Promised Land over all the many years was just a regular routine of work, and sleep and Sabbath – offering the required sacrifices and doing what the Law of Moses taught them to live gratefully to God.

Those instances of God doing mighty things that we read about in the Old Testament didn't happen every day, or even once a year, or even every five years...

And when they did occur we need to remember that we understand them to be mighty things of God because the writers of the scripture interpreted what occurred through the eyes of faith and they wrote it down for people to understand it in that way – so they might know God had acted on their behalf and shown his Covenant Loving-kindness to them.

So, the point I want to make with all this friends is that even though Israel had the historical records of Yahweh's covenant promise to Abraham, His mighty act of delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt, His sustaining power which lead them through the desert the Promised Land, and His power to conquer the Promised Land...

The temptation for the later generations of Israel, who had not experienced some of these mighty acts first hand, was to think – as we often do – that God was always acting mightily

for their ancestors back in the day - but not in their day and age.

Sure Yahweh was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – but that was in the past and they lived in the present and were faced with the more immediate concerns of settling the land, growing crops, raising livestock, building homes, having children and so on.

And anyone who has spent time farming or working the land to make a living knows that you are at the mercy of the power of nature.

Yes you may be one of God's chosen people, but the conditions at Sea will decide if you catch fish and get back to shore safely... that thunderstorm coming in off the Mediterranean Sea is going to decide whether your crops survive or not...

Yes you may be one of God's chosen people, but raiders and attacks from the surrounding nations are going to decide if you get to keep what you've worked for or not...

Friends, in spite of the fact that Yahweh was their Covenant God – the greatest challenge the people of Israel faced in staying faithful to Yahweh was to see Him as relevant to their everyday lives.

Often He didn't seem to be... so Israel turned to the gods who supposedly were; Baal, the Canaanite weather god, and ruler over all the other gods – associated with the storm and thunder and lightning... Yam, the chaotic god of the sea who had been subdued by Baal, and Asherah the goddesses of fertility, whose union with Baal would produce good harvests and lots of livestock.

So, while Yahweh was an unarguable historical reality for Israel, their existence in the Promised Land proved that... what they faced and saw in their day to day struggle to live and

survive made it difficult to see how Yahweh was still relevant to them.

Now friends – that's the same struggle that we still face today!

We also think that God acted mightily back in the day for the nation of Israel, God acted mightily in sending Jesus to forgive sins, the Holy Spirit to empower the early church to do miracles and mighty deeds - but we don't see Him doing those sorts of things anymore in our day and age...

Because we too can only see the more immediate concerns, the powers and forces that we must struggle against each day to make a living, pay the bills and survive.

And we too are tempted to turn to those powers and the forces and put our faith and trust in them and view the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as mostly irrelevant.

Sure we are "Christian" but it's the state of the economy and the oil prices that are going to determine if my job is secure...

Sure I believe Jesus existed but the media will skewer me in the public eye if I take that stance on that issue...

Yes I believe in God but ultimately it's our responsibility to increase security and surveillance in order to counter terrorism...

It's our responsibility to invest wisely for our retirement...

It's our responsibility to exercise and eat right so that we can stay healthy... It's our responsibility to take measures to curb the effects climate change has on nature...

You get the picture.

Now the challenge with what I'm pointing out here, and it was the same with what Israel faced, is that these forces are all real and we do need to deal with them.

To avoid them would be living with our heads stuck in the sand – but how can we engage them without turning them into something more than what they really are?

Because that's the real issue right? These powers and forces loom larger than life for us, they seem bigger and stronger and more real than God, and pretty soon, for all practical intents and purposes, we see them as gods.

But this is where Psalm 29 comes in to help us, as it helped the Israelites back in the day.

You see not every Israelite looked around and was overwhelmed by the larger than life forces that seemed to influence and control the everyday lives of God's people.

David had the eyes of faith to see that Yahweh was alive and well and just as powerful in his time as He had been when He delivered Israel from Egypt and settled them in the Promised Land.

In fact when the larger than life Philistine giant Goliath was taunting and threatening the armies of Israel David had this to say *"Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"* 1 Sam 17:26

And we know that David went and took on Goliath – because of his trust and confidence that Yahweh was actually larger than life – not Goliath.

And that is the perspective that David is proclaiming in Psalm 29 – that Yahweh is greater and stronger and mightier than the forces of nature and the so called gods of nature, and he is exhorting Israel, and us, to worship Yahweh and trust Him to provide for all our needs.

But what made David’s exhortation in Psalm 29 so effective that it was included in scripture is that it is written in poetry.

I mean I can stand here and say to you *“Yahweh is greater and stronger and mightier than anything else in the world, so worship Him alone and trust Him to provide for all our needs.”*

And that is true – but it’s dry, it’s vague, it doesn’t really speak beyond the words which make up the sentence, but the poetry of Psalm 29 does.

And the Holy Spirit uses the capacity that poetry has to articulate truth in a deep and profound way to confront that which we have made into an idol, and knock it down - and reveal Yahweh is actually the supreme ruler over the creation and its seemingly larger than life forces – Amen!

So how does the poetry of Psalm 29 bring home this truth to us?

First, in vs. 1 -2 David re-establishes the worship of Yahweh, secondly in vs. 3-9 he exposes the forces of this world to be merely extensions of Yahweh’s power, and third in vs. 10-11 he proclaims Yahweh as the source of order, peace and prosperity.

But let’s get in a bit closer and let the poetry in these three sections speak to us.

So the first thing we hear in section one is an emphatic repetition to “ascribe to Yahweh... ascribe to Yahweh... ascribe to Yahweh...” which means “worship Yahweh!”

And the reader of the Psalm is not necessarily the one being told to worship Yahweh – it is the heavenly beings – the mighty ones of God, the sons of God who are exhorted to worship Yahweh.

And there's the beauty of poetry – these could be angels in the heavenly court, it could be a veiled reference to the supposed gods who Baal had conquered, it can be the rulers and kings of other nations – but the point made in the opening statement is that if these beings are to “give it up” for Yahweh – the rest of us should to, for there is no other ruler, false god, or angelic being that deserves the credit of being praised as God Almighty – I am that I am.

And the worship of Yahweh occurs in the “splendor of His holiness” which means that it is a splendid thing that Yahweh is separate and distinct from His creation – He is the creator, eternal, everlasting, existing from with-in who He is in himself, and everything else is the creation – dependent upon the creator to order it, sustain it and give it life – and that is the magnificence and brilliance of God being holy.

Because God is distinct from the creation He is able to act upon it and order it and work in it.

And then in the next section David continues on to describe how Yahweh's voice is the means by which God acts fully and completely upon His creation, mentioning it seven times. The voice of Yahweh is the thunder over the mighty waters, meaning that it is Yahweh, not Baal who is Lord of the storm and has conquered the chaotic sea and put it in its place.

The voice of Yahweh is powerful – yes it has to be in order to do what David is claiming.

The voice of Yahweh is majestic – in its almighty power it is also breathtaking and stunning and amazing...

The voice of Yahweh breaks the mighty cedars of Lebanon and Mt. Hermon - these are symbols of strength of the nations around Israel who worship Baal – yet David says Yahweh's voice can smash those symbols of strength and that implies the gods of those nations are powerless before Yahweh.

The voice of Yahweh strikes with flashes of lighting – again it is not Baal who is the god of thunder and lightning, but Yahweh.

The voice of Yahweh shakes the desert of Kadesh – which is not a desert like the Sahara but a place which is desert in that it is not settled or farmed and it is inhabited by wild animals who are not domesticated – and the word for shake is better translated as a dance, whirling and twirling about... in other words it is not desert spirits or genies that make things happen in the wilderness – but Yahweh!

And then with the final statements about the voice of Yahweh we have a double layer that can take place due to how the original Hebrew can be interpreted with different vowel sounds.

One way says that the voice of Yahweh twists the oaks and strips the forest bare – and that translation certainly lines up with the previous mention of the cedar trees and it reaffirms that it is Yahweh who is Lord of the Storm – not Baal.

Another translation however says the voice of Yaweh “*makes the deer shake in labor*” – playing off of the same word for shake as a dance in the previous verse, and then finishes off with “*and pours water on the forests*”

And this interpretation continues the prior theme of Yahweh being the one who makes things happen in the wilderness, and also gives Yahweh credit for fertility - as seen in the birth of animals, and for sending the rain that is needed for the land to produce plants.

I happen to think the second interpretation does a better job at exposing all the powers that Israel would face in their day to day life and be tempted be believe are larger than life, instead of seeing them as being caused by the Voice of Yahweh.

Then David concludes his sevenfold description of the effects of the Voice of Yahweh by saying “all in His temple cry “Glory!” In other words – the voice of Yahweh brings forth a

response from the creation. Yahweh speaks – the creation obeys and its obedience is a cry of glory!

May we echo that cry friends – when the voice of God calls forward a new day and the sun rises – may we echo that cry of Glory to God... When the moon and the stars give their light at night – may we echo their cry of Glory to God!

The Creator's voice – His Word - governs and orders this world and makes it a suitable and inhabitable place for us to pursue our task of reflecting God to the creation as we order and govern the creation within God's order.

So David proclaims this truth by stating "Yahweh sits enthroned over the flood – he is enthroned as King forever."

And not only is this yet another jab at Baal – stating again that it's Yahweh who's actually done the subduing of chaos for our benefit, it is David expands on it saying that chaos will never overthrow Yahweh – as it could Baal.

Furthermore – I hope you are hearing covenant echoes in these two lines.

David is stating the chaos has been so completely subjugated by Yahweh that He can use it as His servant – as He did with the judgement of the flood - and being enthroned forever as King also echoes the Covenant of Preservation; which gives Yahweh's plan to restore the original Covenant of Creation time to develop and come to fruition and completion.

Which is why David ends the Psalm by stating Yahweh gives strength and blesses His people with peace – shalom, the wholeness and restored-ness that God wants for all of Creation.

So now that we've taken a closer look at this poetry and what it is saying to us – I think we need to experience it again in its completed form.

So in a moment we're going to recite this poem together, and open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit;

To allow him to use this poetry to speak to us about whatever it is that we are facing that seems to be a larger-than-life power...

Allow the Holy Spirit to help you see beyond it – and attribute to God those larger-than-life characteristics which you have been ascribing to the economy... or to terrorism... or to climate change... to relationships... to your own health...

Let the Holy Spirit show you how the things we may fear have no power on their own, but that they are only tools in the hand of God, and believe what God's word says in Romans 8:28 that *"in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."*

Let the Holy Spirit reveal to you how the deepest truths of this Psalm have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ - that voice of Yahweh has become the Word made flesh – and we believe as scripture teaches us that in addition to forgiving us of our sin Jesus Christ has been raised *"far above all rule and authority,*

power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come." (Eph 1:21)

And that one day *"at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* (Phil 2:10)

And finally let the Holy Spirit give back to you – all the strength and power which you thought the powers in this world had, but rightfully are attributed to God – may the Holy Spirit fill you with that strength so that your life may be full of shalom; wholeness and restored-ness.

And may the Holy Spirit work this in our lives friends so that we become poetry in motion – living poems whose testimonies go beyond words so that those who know us will be drawn to glorify God and worship Him in the splendor of His holiness as well!

So let us proclaim this psalm together...

¹ Ascribe to Yahweh, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.

² Ascribe to Yahweh the glory due his name;
worship Yahweh in the splendor of his holiness.

³ The voice of Yahweh is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
Yahweh thunders over the mighty waters.

⁴ The voice Yahweh is powerful;
the voice Yahweh is majestic.

⁵ The voice of Yahweh breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

⁶ He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,
Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷ The voice of Yahweh strikes
with flashes of lightning.

⁸ The voice of Yahweh makes the desert twirl;
the Lord twirls the Desert of Kadesh.

⁹ The voice of Yahweh makes the deer give birth
and pours water on the forests.

And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

¹⁰ Yahweh sits enthroned over the flood;
Yahweh is enthroned as King forever.

¹¹ Yahweh gives strength to his people;
Yahweh blesses his people with shalom.

Amen!